The Washington merry-go-round

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WASHINGTON — The Senate Intelligence Committee is investigating allegations that the FBI tried to smear the late Dr. Martin Luther King by spreading stories about his sex life.

Some senators regard this as a classic abuse of police power. It will get special attention, therefore, from the committee.

Dr. King won the Nobel peace prize for his nonviolent crusade to gain equal rights for black Americans. He faced the police dogs and fire hoses of Southern sheriffs without flinching. His cry, "We shall overcome," stirred his people.

Dr. King's rhetoric, however, led him into a collision with the late, powerful FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover. This became one of the famous feuds of the 1960s.

Senate investigators are now trying to determine whether Hoover used the FBI to carry on his vendetta against Dr. King. They want to know who ordered the snooping and who leaked the sex stories to the press. They are also searching for FBI agents who participated in the actual surveillance of the civil rights leader.

We were the first to reveal on May 24, 1968, that the FBI had tapped Dr. King's telephones. We reported that the wiretaps had divulged information about his alleged love affairs, a subject that was none of the FBI's business.

Now, more than seven years later, we have dug deeper into the story for the answers the senators are seeking.

There is bitter disagreement over who first suggested that the FBI eavesdrop on Dr. King. But in October, 1963, Hoover obtained — some say wangled — a memorandum from then - Atty. Gen. Robert Kennedy authorizing the controversial wiretaps.

The official justification was to determine whether Dr. King had any secret ties with the Communists. But the only secret dealings that the wiretaps revealed were with women. His dynamism and courage had made him attractive to many women.

Here are examples of the sort of smut that the FBI collected about the Nobel prize winner:

The FBI bugged his suite in Washington's elegant, old Willard Hotel. He allegedly drank too many "Black Russian" concoctions, bragged of his sexual prowess to a woman visitor and then proceeded to prove his boast.

In Las Vegas, Dr. King allegedly picked up an FBI informant who reported to the FBI next morning that he had paid her $100 to spend the night with him.

Another time, he allegedly became intoxicated and made passes at a woman in a New York City hotel. The secret FBI summary of the incident reported that "King threatened to leap from the 13th floor window of the hotel if this women would not say she loved him."

The CIA forwarded a raw, unverified report to the FBI that Dr. King, totally naked, chased a woman through an Oslo hotel during his Norway visit to receive the Nobel peace prize.

The FBI also monitored Dr. King's relationship with the vivacious wife of a Los Angeles dentist. The FBI called it an "illicit affair." The woman insisted the relationship was "Merely a friendship."

As part of its continuing surveillance, the FBI bugged Dr. King's hotel suite in Atlantic City during the 1964 Democratic convention. But apparently nothing of significance was picked up. The FBI continued its electronic surveillance of Dr. Martin Luther King, according to our sources, until his death in April 1968. The latest secret sex report we saw was dated Feb. 20, 1968.

In other words, the FBI continued listening to Dr. King's most private conversations for nearly five years. Yet during all this time, the FBI picked up no evidence that he had committed a crime or was likely to commit one. J. Edgar Hoover's boys just kept filling up folders with titillating tidbits, idle gossip and vicious slander about the great Dr. King. His FBI dossier can only be described, therefore, as a blackmail file.

Indeed, we can prove that FBI officials tried to peddle embarrassing items about Dr. King to newsmen. Our FBI sources also say that Hoover's loyal sidekick, the late Clyde Tolson, sent the Willard Hotel tape anonymously to the civil rights leader's wife, Coretta King.

But the blackmail, apparently, didn't work. Dr. King's close friend and associate, Rep. Walter Fauntroy, D-D.C., told us the late leader was fully aware of the FBI's surveillance and wasn't the least deterred by it.

He didn't even mind if newspapers published the blackmail information because he felt it would hurt the FBI more than himself, said Fauntroy.

With LES WHITTEN

Footnote: After Dr. King's death, the FBI continued to monitor the activities of his successor, the Rev. Ralph Abernathy. We showed him a secret FBI report, detailing a conversation he had held with his wife. He said it could only have come from a bug in his bedroom.

In fairness, it should be added that the present FBI director, Clarence Kelley, has taken the FBI out of the blackmail business completely. Under Kelley, the FBI is as honest and honorable a law enforcement agency as can be found anywhere in the world.